

**Report to:** Cabinet

**Date of meeting:** 28 September 2023

**By:** Chief Executive

**Title:** Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge report and response

**Purpose:** To seek approval to publish the Local Government Association's report of the East Sussex County Council Corporate Peer Challenge, conducted in June 2023, and our response to the recommendations in that report

---

## ***RECOMMENDATIONS***

**Cabinet is recommended to:**

- 1) note the report of the Local Government Association's Corporate Peer Challenge (Appendix 1) and agree to its publication; and**
  - 2) agree to publish the Council's response to the recommendations within it, as set out in Appendix 2.**
- 

## **1 Background**

1.1 As a key part of its sector-led support programme, the Local Government Association (LGA) offers a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) to all councils, approximately every five years. LGA CPCs are intended to be a robust and effective continuous improvement tool managed and delivered by the sector, for the sector, with local government officers and members – as 'peers' - at the heart of the process. They help councils with their development by providing a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

1.2 Following discussions with the LGA, East Sussex County Council (ESCC) commissioned a CPC to take place in June 2023, including a site visit from 20-23 June. The review offered a timely opportunity to check in on progress over the recent challenging years, including the impact of the pandemic, and to provide an external perspective on how ESCC has been approaching future challenges and whether we are capturing all we can from national best practice.

1.3 Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The peer team who conducted the ESCC CPC were:

- Dr Martin Reeves, Chief Executive, Oxfordshire County Council
- Cllr Simon Geraghty, Leader of Worcestershire County Council
- Matti Raudsepp - Director of Customer, Arts & Property, Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole Council.
- Julie Greaves - Head of Sustainability, Hertfordshire County Council
- Angela Kawa, LGA
- Sophie Kitching, Warwickshire County Council

1.4 As part of the CPC process, the peer team reviewed a range of documents, including an ESCC position statement (Appendix 3), which set out an overview of our priorities and approach, alongside the geographic, economic, and demographic context in which we deliver services.

1.5 The team then spent three and a half days on site in East Sussex (in both Lewes and Newhaven) from 20-23 June, during which they gathered information and views from over 50 meetings. The team spoke to over 100 people, including members, council staff, external stakeholders and partners. They also undertook further research and reading.

1.6 At the end of the site visit, the peer team provided initial feedback on their findings at a meeting open to all those who had participated in the CPC. A feedback report was then drafted by the peer team and shared with ESCC in August 2023.

## **2 Supporting information**

2.1 During their visit, the peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all CPCs, and which are critical to councils' performance and development:

- Local priorities and outcomes
- Organisational and place leadership
- Governance and culture
- Financial planning and management
- Capacity for improvement

2.2 In addition to these questions, ESCC asked the peer team to provide feedback on ESCC's ongoing response to climate change issues.

2.3 It is important to note that the CPC is not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and delivery.

### **Feedback from the CPC team**

2.4 The initial feedback presentation and CPC final report is very positive, finding ESCC to be a well-run and well-managed council, a trusted and respected partner with a strong track record of service delivery. Comments made during the site visit included that one person was 'Astounded by the breadth of knowledge in the organisation' and that the Council is 'Brimming with moral purpose'. Staff members said that they are 'Proud to work for ESCC. No egos. Well run and positive' and that the Council is 'the most inclusive place I have worked'.

2.5 Moreover, the team found that:

- The Leader and Chief Executive are well respected by staff, partners and members, described as accessible, approachable and responsive. The peer team commented that the managerial and political leadership of the council is well established.
- The whole council is open, approachable and inclusive with a genuine commitment to equality and diversity.
- Staff are loyal, proud and dedicated. There is no particular fixation on hierarchy and staff work together collaboratively to achieve the best outcomes they can for residents.
- The council is financially prudent, an evidence-based organisation, with a strong foundation of financial and governance processes as well as robust procedures in

internal audit, risk and assurance. The council has a good record of financial stability and on the delivery of savings.

- There is evidence of a strong track record of delivery across all key service areas and the peer team commented that ESCC is an organisation that does what it says it will do and does it well.
- The council has a strong commitment to partnership working and is considered to be a trusted and respected partner.
- There are good member-officer relations built on trust and mutual respect, with members reporting that they get good support from officers.

### **Suggested areas for development and recommendations**

2.6 The CPC initial presentation and feedback report also set out some suggestions and recommendations to consider, building on strong foundations already in place, to put the council on an even firmer footing for the future. For example, the peer team's view is that there is more work to be done on how the identified budget gap for 2025/26 and 2026/27 should be addressed. The peer team also made recommendations around the potential to develop our strong partnerships further, to deliver further work to increase diversity in the organisation, to share the council's successes more widely and to continue to act on the future of office spaces, reflecting the move to hybrid working.

2.7 On climate change, there are good foundations in place on carbon reduction, however it is the view of the peer team that more could be done to work collaboratively with partners on wider climate issues and that there is ongoing work required to embed climate change work across the organisation.

2.8 The final report contains eight formal recommendations covering these areas which are set out in the CPC report at Appendix 1.

2.9 As part of the CPC process, the council is expected to respond to these recommendations in the form of an action plan and the draft response is included at Appendix 2.

2.10 The response highlights existing work against each of the recommendations, alongside our plans for the coming months. This includes work to update our assessment of service demands and funding expectations to inform budget planning for 2024/25 and beyond, to consider our options on the future of the County Hall site and to develop a new People Strategy for 2024-27 which will include further action to support the recruitment of a diverse workforce. The response also commits the council to review the area-wide partnership arrangements on climate change and to undertake a review of internal communications to include recommendations on how to showcase and celebrate success at the council. The council will consider, with partners, whether a place-based narrative for East Sussex would add value over and above existing place-based work and strategies.

### **Next steps**

2.11 The CPC process includes a six-month check-in session with the LGA which provides an opportunity for the council to update peers on progress against the action plan and to discuss next steps. When the CPC report and response is published, we will make arrangements for the six-month follow up conversation.

## **3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations**

3.1 It is an expectation of the CPC process that the report produced by the CPC team is published by the relevant council alongside a response to the recommendations in the form of an action plan. The LGA will also publish the CPC report on its website. The publication of the report and the response is an opportunity to celebrate and publicise the positive

feedback received and to set out our plans for the coming months to strengthen our approach further in tackling the challenges ahead.

3.2 Cabinet is therefore recommended to approve the publication of the CPC report and the response document at Appendices 1 and 2.

**BECKY SHAW**  
**Chief Executive**

Contact Officer: Alice Pippard/Claire Lee  
Tel. No. 01273481816  
Email: [alice.pippard@eastsussex.gov.uk](mailto:alice.pippard@eastsussex.gov.uk)

LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None